

Negative and Positive Dialectics

People seem to have a confusion going on about dialectics, either in that they are not aware of what *Hegel's* dialectics are about in general or because they're confused as to which *kind of Hegel's* dialectics are going on. On the first issue I've already written a [blog post](#) about, and if general online searches and discussions show anything, it's that someone has to bring to awareness the differences concerning the second.

Hegel can be said to use dialectics in two modes: *negative* and *positive*. Negative dialectics are mainly to be found mentioned outside the system which Hegel builds in the *Logic* and beyond—in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*—while positive dialectics are to be found in the system itself.

Negative Dialectics

As the name implies, negative dialectics negate their terms rather than sublate them. It must be stated: *negative dialectics are not unique to Hegel*—other philosophers, such as Plato and the Pyrrhonian skeptics use a similar method of drawing out inner contradictions. These types of dialectics are *self-destructing*—one could say they are 'explosive'—and lead nowhere but to a skeptical state in knowledge, nullification of something, and if one wanted to talk of life they lead to death. The *Phenomenology of Spirit* is full of such dialectics; they are the bricks that form the highway of despair which Spirit traverses in its search for knowledge.

Negative dialectics are, for the most part, related concepts with content claims which are betrayed by their form and vice versa. To take the usual famous example: in the master-slave dialectic, the immanent content driving the relation, the desire and need for mutual recognition for self-consciousness, is in complete contradiction to the relational form of a master and slave. In such a relation, full *recognition is impossible* due to the inequalities of power as well as the self-undermining of the very possibility of recognition for each in their respective standpoint in the relation. What does this result in? It results in the *dissolution* of the master-slave social form as an answer to the problem it begins with in the struggle for recognition. The content and form are not in harmony and one must be cancelled eventually.

Another example: Force and its Expression are first posited by the Understanding as the answer to the problem arising from Perception: how can an object be understood to be one and many at the same time? Or: how is it intelligibly possible to conceive a unity of unity and difference? The answer to this problem is posed in the form of Force as an absolute universal principle underlying its differentiated Expression. Force is posited as an absolute content and Expression as a mere relative form of this content. Under speculative analysis, however, Force and Expression find themselves to be empty of intelligibility as different concepts for they each are defined merely as a

moment of movement towards the other—the one is many is one is many... If we attempt to articulate the terms as rigid differences with Force and Expression as a dualism of substances, however, there is then an *unintelligible* connection between Force and Expression: *Why* does Force manifest as its Expression? How can Force be the essence of Expression, the only truth, yet have Expression be definitely *not* Force itself but rather something separate that merely seems to be? Force itself is unable to provide an answer; thus, its structure of concepts are discarded, but from its process there is a positive concept gleamed from its total activity. From the failures of Force, we find a movement of cognition which reveals a structure of the kind which is sought as an answer. Infinity appears as a concept which achieves the unity of unity and difference, and which explains how unitary oneness manifests as plural appearances. But this concept is only a new beginning, its structure goes beyond it and brings consciousness into the relation of infinity to infinity.

Were Hegel a mere skeptic, we would expect that the negative dialectic would simply end with dissolution. However, there is a positive moment to Hegel's method in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the **determinate negation** left over from the cancellation of the terms of a form of consciousness. From Sense-Certainty the determinate negation is the sensuously mediated universal which was *implicit* to its activity. From Perception the determinate negation is the differentiated universal, and from Understanding what remains is Infinity—also *implicit* in the activities of these forms of consciousness.

The problem originally posed persists: What is the absolute and how can I know it with certainty? This question manifests with the absolute as the object of every form of consciousness, and its ways of knowing that presupposed object. Every form of consciousness in the book is posed to answer this question in the various general forms humanity has tried to answer it. Insofar as a form of consciousness advances this question, it comes into the inquiry and adds something, and insofar as it is revealed that it is vacuous and its form traps and conceals the positive content in it, it is dissolved and its structures/concepts are discarded and replaced with new forms of consciousness which provide concepts that are adequate to the concept structures left over from a dissolution.

The final negative result of the *Phenomenology* is: ***None of the forms of consciousness analyzed in the book offer a working structure that shows itself to be absolute and not self-destructing. They are all found to be insubstantial upon inquiry.***

The positive result is: ***Since all of these forms of consciousness exhaust the possibilities of knowledge in the form of something opposed as external to consciousness and unlike consciousness, the only remaining option is to discard the presupposition of the opposition of consciousness. The determinate negation of the opposition of consciousness as a whole is the remaining answer.***

We can begin without assuming any predetermined structure of knowing and its object as one assuming that the knower, knowing, and known are separate. This is what leads to the *Science of Logic*.

Beyond these results, however, are also the interesting results of the nature of phenomenal consciousness—its possible structures of self-understanding and its relation to others and to the world. In this manner, the entirety of the *Phenomenology* also reveals the fundamental possible structures which humans will develop in order to come to such understandings. In this *none of the forms of consciousness are ever discarded*. In self-consciousness, we apply sense-certainty, perception, and understanding. These are preserved as momentary structures of knowing which are limited to accessing an object only in some manner, and are recognized as not absolute. Not only are these forms of knowing *not* absolute, they are ultimately limited to the form of the knowing which assumes the opposition of consciousness and are themselves thus bracketed as mere moments leading to eventual conclusion of an inquiry that produces true scientific knowledge. All are possible forms of human consciousness, but all but one can logically function without prior forms available to them (Absolute Knowing), yet this form of consciousness only comes onto the scene after the forms of natural consciousness are gone through in their complexity and show themselves to be inadequate as a whole, only then is the negation of the opposition of consciousness (which we naturally presuppose) overcome.

Positive Dialectics

Opposed to the negative method, positive dialectics do not negate and dissolve the terms related. This type of dialectic is what is unique to Hegel in his particular way. It isn't that no one else before had thought of concepts that unite seemingly contradictory ones, but rather that no one before Hegel had shown how these synthetic concepts managed to differentiate yet unify what seems contradictory. Everyone knew before Hegel that Becoming was an intermediary concept uniting Being and Nothing, yet apparently no one had quite known what to make of how this concept made sense in relation to Being and Nothing.

In the dialectics of the *Science of Logic*, *Philosophy of Nature*, and *Philosophy of Spirit*, **every single moment is true and is maintained in every subsequent concept**. The only general negation that goes on is the negation of the claim these concepts have to being *absolute* truths that explain *everything*. Negation as such, cancellation, happens in the very dialectics themselves where terms contradict each other while undermining themselves, but this contradiction does not dissolve these terms like the *Phenomenology's* forms of consciousness *seem* to generally dissolve themselves as inadequate forms. Being is limited to what it applies to; Essence is limited to what it applies to; Concept is limited to what it applies to; Nature is limited to what it applies

to.

In the dialectic of Becoming to Determinate Being, it is *not the case that Becoming is **ever** discarded*. In the dialectic of Something to Infinity, it is *not the case that Something is **ever** discarded*. In the Dialectic of Nature to Spirit, it is *not the case that anything in Nature is ever discarded*. Positive dialectics build upon concepts, showing limitations of concepts as their incompleteness and to the extent that they are incomplete they are untrue, but they are maintained through all subsequent developments.

Perhaps it goes without saying, but it should be slightly clear that *nothing* in Hegel is quite one sided. Notice that in his negative dialectics he does not merely destroy the opposed incompatible terms, he has a positive moment in every dialectic of the *Phenomenology* just as much as he has the positive moment in the following system. Hegel himself tells us that the dialectical *moment* is itself the moment of negation and contradiction, but in a scientific inquiry such results themselves leave something positive. In truth, Hegel's mature philosophy in the *Phenomenology* and onward always has his peculiar *negatively positive* dialectic in play.